

welcome the change coming soon to your life

by Debra R. Sullivan

"Welcome the change coming soon to your life" was the message in my fortune cookie last June. It wasn't the most exciting fortune I had received so I threw it away. In July, my life changed drastically. But it wasn't a change that I welcomed. In August I went out for sushi again and received another fortune cookie. It said, "Welcome the change coming soon to your life." Maybe I needed to give that message some more thought.

In a recent conversation with other early childhood educators about change, four key questions surfaced:

1. How do we find ways to slow change?



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2. How do you successfully lead people through change?
3. How does a leader use relationships and vision to lead change?
4. How do we ensure that training facilitates changes?

In answering each question, I thought about the message in my fortune cookie and how I had originally dismissed it as obscure and irrelevant. I realize now that there is nothing obscure and irrelevant about change. Sometimes it is planned and welcomed with open arms and sometimes it arrives unannounced and unexpected. Planned change requires strong vision. Unplanned change requires strong leadership. In either case, maybe we need to pay more attention to messages given to us by others about change.

Question 1: How do we find ways to slow change?

Change is inevitable. In a progressive country change is constant.

Benjamin Disraeli

We live in a time when constant change is inevitable, so I'm not sure it is possible

to slow change — especially when we're not in charge of it. The speed at which our world moves these days is astounding. Trying to slow change may be more like trying to slow a moving train. So effective leadership may require redefining objectives: not slowing change, but understanding it better. Strong leaders keep a competitive edge by paying close attention to rapid change and the direction in which it is headed. A strong vision defines what the destination is and what it will take to get there.

But there is another aspect of this question that should not be missed. Slowing change also has to do with the quality of our time. Just because the world is moving fast and we can't slow change doesn't mean we have to give up quality time or time spent thinking, reflecting, and considering. For example, it is okay to forego texting and e-mail to call someone on the phone to have a conversation. Or better yet, meet for coffee or tea and sit down and talk. In a time of rapid change, successful leaders must strike a balance between keeping pace and pacing oneself. This can be a real challenge when you are expected to respond to 50 e-mails a day, answer your cell phone every time it rings (regardless of what you are doing), and respond to text messages within seconds of receiving them. In the movie and film

industry, there is an interesting special effect in which someone is moving around at a normal pace while everyone else is moving at a breakneck pace. Our leadership challenge is to move that from reel to reality. You may not be in control of the speed of change, but you are most definitely in control of how you manage it.

Question 2: How do you successfully lead people through change?

When the best leader's work is done the people say, "We did it ourselves!"

Lao-Tzu

Leading people through change can be tricky indeed. The nature of the change will have a major influence on its level of difficulty and how long it takes. Notice that I did not say level of difficulty or ease. Change is rarely easy — even when it is planned or welcomed. Change equals different and different always requires an adjustment. Success in leading people through change requires a few intentional and thoughtful steps: Preparation/communication, implementation, transitional support, and what I like to call 'anti-backsliding' strategies.

Preparation/Communication: Once upon a time, I was hired by a small organization that wanted to grow in size. It was really quite the 'small town' organization: Everyone knew everyone else, customers were like family, and efficiency reigned supreme. However, they wanted to grow and they wanted me to make that happen. Although they had a strong commitment to change, I was equally certain that they had no idea what would happen if they did. To prepare the organization for growth, I told them daily, "If you grow, you will get bigger." Most of the time they gave me bewildered looks or just laughed. But I kept reminding them: If you grow, you will get bigger. The graceful, well-

dressed, efficient you will be gone. You won't be able to maneuver around in the same way. People will treat you differently because you look different. You'll lose some of your self-confidence and composure. Still, there were those who would come to me and say, in effect, "People treat me differently now" and I would say, "That's because you grew and now you're bigger."

Implementation: Once you've prepared people by communicating about the change, effective leadership requires the development of a carefully thought-out implementation plan. This does not mean that change will happen without incident if you have a plan. It just means that careful thought has been given to potential problems and solutions. The good news is that even major shifts in practices can happen fairly quickly with minimal disruption.

Let's take an example: Last September, Samoa switched to driving on the left side of the road after driving on the right side for over a century. Part of the implementation strategies included a two-day holiday during the first two days of the changeover to ease traffic as people got used to the new rules and a three-day ban on alcohol sales to deter accidents. Sweden made the same shift about 40 years ago. Implementation strategies there included a prohibition on private motor-driven vehicles four hours before and one hour after the conversion along with a very low speed limit that was raised gradually as people adjusted.

Transitional Support: Sometimes, even with preparation, an abundance of communication, and excellent implementation strategies, people will need additional support. Transitional support is about giving people what they need to help them make a change. It acknowledges that change is not easy and that there are steps we can take to encourage forward movement. Transitional support in leadership could range anywhere

from a supportive cheer to the National Guard.

Let's look at another example: School desegregation efforts in the United States in the 1960s after the Brown decision. At that time, children had to be escorted into schools with armed guards because, even with preparation, communication, and implementation plans, the change to racially integrated classrooms was about more than a shift in patterns and practices; it was about people's beliefs and perceptions of others.

In leading people through change, successful leaders look beyond implementation and constantly assess how change is progressing. They then use that assessment to determine what is needed — for both individuals and for the group — in the way of resources, guidance, assistance, and support. Successful leaders understand that providing transitional support is much like supporting children's development — not everyone is in the same place, not everyone needs the same thing, and not everyone is on the same 'transitional time schedule.'

'Anti-backsliding' Strategies: Backsliding happens. Even when you have engaged in and employed a highly successful change process, it is only natural for there to be an inclination to revert to the status quo. Backsliding happens because it is always easier to do what you have always done. Leaders of successful change efforts are prepared for backsliding and develop strategies to address it, manage it, and prevent it.

In my work as an early childhood coach, I have worked with preschool teachers to change the way children handle conflict and problem solving in the classroom. Too often, when children are having a conflict or are struggling to accomplish a task, the teacher will step in and solve the problem for them. It is much quicker to take the toy away from two children who aren't sharing or to tie the shoe of

the child who hasn't quite mastered that skill than it is to spend the time and have the patience to let children try to solve problems on their own. I discuss with teachers the importance of helping children develop critical thinking, reasoning, and conflict resolution skills if they are to be successful. We create an implementation plan that involves teaching the children specific problem-solving strategies early in the school year. For transitional support, teachers team up with each other and observe each others' practices to support one another in inviting children to engage in problem solving.

And still, when things get hectic in the classroom and this child won't share and that child's shoelaces come undone for the fourth time, the teacher just solves the problem herself. After all, it's quicker that way. To avoid this, I give teachers two anti-backsliding strategies that help:

- First, we work together to make observation be the teacher's initial response:
 - "I see you both want the toy."
 - "I see you're trying to tie your shoe."
 That provides just enough time for teachers to remember to ask the children what they think a good solution would be.
- Second, I ask teachers to put the children in charge:
 - Tell children they should try to solve problems themselves before asking a teacher for help.
 - Have them remind the teacher of this rule when she forgets. Children love reminding grown-ups when they forget the 'rules.'

Effective leaders of successful change acknowledge that past habits and patterns are hard to break, and they are prepared for redirection and refocusing as needed.

Successfully leading people through

change is difficult, but not impossible. In the end, successful change will depend heavily on each individual's participation and persistence. So much so that they say, "We did it ourselves!"

Question 3: How does a leader use relationships and vision to lead change?

A single bracelet does not jingle.

Congolese Proverb

I like the idea of a leader creating a jingling effect by bringing many people together around a vision. Having an exciting vision that compels people to change is, in my opinion, the most important ingredient for effective leadership. After all, people need to know where you are headed, they must want to go there, and they must want to go there with you. A compelling vision gives leadership for change a strong beginning because it contains the 'what if' factor.

- What if this is not impossible?
- What if we could really create such a change?
- What if circumstances could be different?
- What if it's my purpose in life to make it happen?

Strong leaders with strong vision can answer these questions. And they are usually too busy achieving the impossible to be listening to naysayers explain why it can't be done.

Successful leaders with a strong vision are very intentional. They operate with intent:

- They intend to succeed.
- They intend to accomplish their goals.
- They intend to change unsatisfactory circumstances.
- They intend to create a better way.

It does not occur to them that they will not be successful; success is just a matter of time. Impossible just takes a little longer than difficult. A strong

vision must be ambitious! Sometimes, when leaders are describing their vision, someone will say, "That's ambitious" in a way that can create momentary self-doubt. Always remember that ambition is a good thing! People without ambition will never lead change because they are usually without vision.

Of course, vision alone will not lead change and one person alone cannot make lasting change. Lasting change requires the commitment and support of others. Effective leaders of successful change know that relationships with others are key:

- Leadership requires followership and followership relies on relationships.
- People have to believe you are going to accomplish what you set out to do if they are to support your efforts. This is true whether the relationship is more transactional (e.g., backing a loan to fund your work) or more transformational (e.g., eliminating illiteracy in a high-poverty neighborhood).
- Genuine, authentic relationships create an environment of trust, collaboration, and a willingness to persist.

The vision is the jingle. The relationships are the other bracelets. Together they can create powerful, lasting change.

Question 4: How do you ensure training facilitates changes?

Alice came to a fork in the road. "Which road do I take?" she asked.

"Where do you want to go?" responded the Cheshire cat.

"I don't know," Alice answered.

"Then," said the cat, "it doesn't matter."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

This question relates back to the previous questions. If you don't know where you are going, no training you provide will facilitate change. A strong vision is

clear about the end result, making all paths to it more apparent. I have been in some early childhood settings where training is offered as a list of things people should know or be able to do, not as clearly defined steps toward a clearly articulated vision of what the program wants for children and families. Teachers go to training after training, but nothing changes.

Everyone is frustrated: Staff because they keep taking training, and supervisors because they keep offering training.

The first step to remedying this situation is a clearly articulated vision. Know where you want to go! Then make sure all of your training leads you there. For example, if your vision is to serve a linguistically diverse population better, then all of your training should be focused on topics such as second and third language acquisition, increasing your staff's ability to use more than one language, supporting children's multiple language acquisition, and increasing family literacy. If, on the other hand, your vision is to prepare children living in poverty for academic excellence in kindergarten, then your training will focus on learning more about programs, strategies, curriculum, and practices that have done exactly that.

And then there is intent. Intent implies an expectation. If you intend to achieve your vision, then you must be clear in expecting everyone to work toward that vision. Too often training is provided but not everyone intends to apply that training to their work; and the program does not establish ways to assess change in practice, patterns, behaviors, or beliefs. People must know that someone will be monitoring their performance to determine if knowledge and skill developed in training are being implemented in practice. If no one is checking, it's too easy to keep doing as you've always done.

Finally, it's about relationships. Leaders who have genuine, authentic relation-

ships with others find it easy to provide clear expectations — and high expectations at that. Successful leaders do not encourage mediocrity. They encourage excellence. They have high expectations of their staff so that staff, in turn, will have high expectations for themselves and for children. Most children are thrilled when given the opportunity, time, and resources to improve upon what they're doing — especially when they know their caregiver believes they can do it! The same is true of many adults. When leaders support staff's growth and development and believe they can achieve excellence, they do.

Conclusion

Change is many things. It:

- Is inevitable.
- Is rapid.
- Requires an adjustment.
- Relies on genuine, authentic relationships.
- Requires a clearly articulated vision.
- Must include clear intent, high expectations, and diligent assessment.
- Is difficult, but not impossible.

Welcome the change coming soon to your life.